

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 501

CS 007 456

AUTHOR Geller, Linda Gibson
TITLE Steps in the Child's Grasp of Ambiguities through Word Play.
PUB DATE 29 Apr 82
NOTE 38p.; Expanded version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (27th, Chicago, IL, April 26-30, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Differences; *Child Development; *Cognitive Processes; Elementary Education; *Figurative Language; *Language Research; Language Skills; Language Usage; Phoneme Grapheme Correspondence; Reading Comprehension; *Semantics
IDENTIFIERS *Lexical Ambiguity; *Word Games

ABSTRACT

A study examined the differences in the appreciation of language ambiguity as represented in the word play of children aged 6 through 11 years. In six weekly play sessions, students were read stories containing many lexical ambiguities and pictures and were invited to verbalize and to draw similar ambiguities. Criteria necessary to the construction of an adequate response were the definition of two incongruously related meanings for a single phonetic sequence and the juxtaposition of these meanings in words and pictures to suggest that each is a legitimate interpretation of the other. The results indicated that appreciation of ambiguity in this age range develops from a clarification of sound/meaning relations of potentially ambiguous words or phrases to the exploitation of these relations through play. Moreover, in later years the shift to play with ambiguities represented by literal interpretations of figurative expressions has implications for children's development of metaphoric competencies. Finally, the study's design suggests that word play is a potential contributor to program development in language education. (Several drawings produced by the subjects are appended.) (HTH)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED240501

Steps in the Child's Grasp of Ambiguities
through Word Play

Linda Gibson Geller

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Linda Gibson Geller

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 007 456

An Abstract of: STEPS IN THE CHILD'S GRASP OF AMBIGUITIES
THROUGH WORD PLAY

The rationale for this study derives from recent research which points to reciprocal relations between metalinguistic awareness and the learning-to-read process. An activity identified as supporting the development of such awareness is children's word play. In the context of play children scrutinize the forms of language rather than its "messages." This study focuses on the differences in the appreciation of ambiguity as represented in the verbal play in the six-to-eleven age range. The report provides a brief theoretical summary of stages of word play in the elementary years and a description of naturalistic research procedures for collecting and analyzing examples of ambiguity play in the classrooms of these ages. The results indicate that the sequence of appreciation of ambiguity in this age range moves from a clarification of sound/meaning relations of potentially ambiguous words/phrases (sixes and sevens) to the exploitation of these relations through play (eights through elevens). Moreover, in the later years, the shift to play with ambiguities represented by literal interpretations of figurative expressions has implications for children's development of metaphoric competencies. Lastly, the design of the study suggests that word play is a potential contributor to program development in language education.

STEPS IN THE CHILD'S GRASP OF AMBIGUITIES
THROUGH WORD PLAY

That word play represents an integral part of children's language activities is undeniable. Even without the collection and publication of thousands of examples of English children's verbal play by Iona and Peter Opie (1959), all of us who are educators or parents of young children can attest to the reliability with which succeeding groups of youngsters "discover" and explore play forms such as riddles, tongue twisters, chants, parody verses, knock-knocks, etc. Not only do the forms themselves remain intact over generations but specific examples of each are passed along without distortion. It sometimes seems as if each succeeding generation of youngsters has a direct line of communication with its predecessor.

The potential significance of word play to literacy learning is its relation to the development of metalinguistic awareness (Cazden, 1974; Chomsky, 1981; Clark 1978; Mattingly, 1972). In the context of play, children examine the "how" rather than the "what" of verbal communication. They scrutinize the nature of the system itself -- how structures of sound, meaning and syntax operate in verbal exchange. Researchers of reading processes suggest there is a reciprocal relation

between youngster's developing awareness of language forms and literacy learning (Fischer, 1980; Lundberg, 1978). The learning-to-read process, writes Fischer, is defined in part by the learner's capacity to be aware of "formal properties of language," (p. 35), e.g., systems for transposing speech into print. This sequence differs from that involved in learning to speak wherein consciousness of rule systems appears to follow from rather than precede acquisition. A rationale for the study of children's word play, then, is that it has the potential to make ". . . one human adaptation, literacy, easier to achieve because the child's attention has been focused on the means, the forms of language, whereas in normal communicative contexts, his attention is focused only on the end" (Cazden, p. 34).

A major strategy of play in all forms is the exploiting of ambiguities represented in the phonological and lexical systems of our language. Strategies exploiting the sounds of the system derive their ambiguous status from the fact that a single phonetic string can stand for words/phrases entirely different in meaning:

--What is black and white and red all over?

A newspaper.

--Why did the cookie cry? Because its
mother was a wafer so long.

As the examples show, the exploitation of sound similarities often derives from words historically distinct (red/read) or

those paired through the manipulation of word boundaries (a wafer/away for). Strategies derived from lexical ambiguities, on the other hand, exploit the fact that a single word or phrase can have more than one meaning:

--(stand for more than one class of objects)

What has an eye but cannot see? A needle,
potato, etc.

--(figurative expressions which can be

literally interpreted) What did the rug
say to the floor? I've got you covered.

It should be noted that in the past most attempts to codify reciprocal relations between development of language awareness and reading processes have concentrated on the emergence of the child's phonological sensitivities. The rationale for this was that, at the very least, learning to read requires some degree of understanding of the alphabetic principle and how it functions in the representation of speech sounds. Recently, however, more attention has been given to the ability to detect and resolve linguistic ambiguities in oral and written language. Given the polysemous and homophonic character of our language -- as well as potential ambiguities inherent in many syntactic constructions -- such a skill appears to be fundamental to the efficient processing of speech or print (Asch and Nerlove 1960; Pearson and Johnson 1978; Shultz 1973; Smith 1978).

Along with examples from traditional word play repertoires, our recent generation of elementary children have been exposed to additional ways of playing with ambiguity through the publication of books like Amelia Bedelia (Parish, 1963) and The King Who Rained (Gwynne, 1970). The characters in these books have a penchant for producing unexpected interpretations of ambiguous expressions. When asked to "dress the chicken," for example, Amelia, a domestic worker, attires it in shorts and socks. In both books, the intended meaning of the word or phrase is contextually conveyed while its incongruous alternative is represented in pictures. In the mid-seventies these books were very popular in the classrooms of six to eleven year olds for which I was the curriculum coordinator. What was especially noteworthy was the fact that these were the only books enjoyed by the entire age range.

The question this raised was: What might this response to ambiguity play as represented in the appreciation of these books indicate about these ages understanding of this language structure? The laboratory research of Thomas Shultz and colleagues provided some explanations (Shultz, 1974; Shultz & Horibe, 1974; Shultz & Pilon, 1973). In these studies, youngsters in the six to twelve age range were asked to provide evidence of comprehension of ambiguous statements in both humorous and non-humorous material. Beginning with eight-year-olds, most could pinpoint the source of ambiguity

and describe the sound/meaning variables responsible for the pun. This was not true of the six-year-olds (sevens were not investigated) whose laughter could often be traced to an appreciation of the nonsensical descriptions embedded in the play forms. Thus in the riddle, "Why did the cookie cry?" they were delighted by the absurd suggestion that cookies cry and have mothers and not the fact that the phonetic string 'a wafer' might be interpreted 'away for'. In fact, the latter possibility was not detected.

In terms of appreciation of the Parish and Gwynne books, the responses of the three older classes (8's; 9's; and a mixed group of 10-11's) were developmentally appropriate, while those of the youngest group (a mixed class of 6-7's) were puzzling (Shultz et al). However, the fact that the incongruities were often pictorially represented (a chicken in shorts and socks) could account for the younger children's delight. The appreciation of perceptual incongruities is a phase of play which precedes the appreciation of those which are linguistically derived (McGhee, 1972). An awareness of linguistic ambiguity, then, need not be present to appreciate the humor of many of Amelia's interpretations.

In pursuing possibilities for ambiguity play with my four classes of elementary youngsters, I was motivated by two considerations. The first was the opportunity to extend our understanding of grasp of verbal ambiguities in this age range by having the children create their own examples of

this type of play. Shultz's studies assess comprehension of ambiguity through requests for verbal descriptions of strategies of play in predetermined examples. Other dimensions of youngsters comprehension -- or lack of it -- should be revealed by inviting them to produce their own versions of ambiguity play.

The second consideration was the chance to use the classroom as the place of investigation. Certainly producing one's own version of a written form -- besides being typical of classroom activities -- promised, in the case of ambiguity play, to open new possibilities for program design. As an elementary educator, I had to take careful note of the fact that in their word play, youngsters were spontaneously exploring so vital and complex an aspect of our language as its potential for ambiguity. Why, I asked myself, shouldn't such explorations-through-play be a regular part of elementary programs?

Collection Procedures

In planning procedures for collecting data in these four classrooms, I decided to use the Parish book as a model for play. In addition to "dress the chicken," the following list describes Amelia's tasks and her interpretations:

Tasks

(a) Change the towels in
the green bathroom

Amelia's Interpretation

A. cuts towels into different
shapes.

- | | |
|--|--|
| (b) Dust the furniture. | A. takes box of bath powder
and spreads on furniture. |
| (c) Draw the drapes when
the sun comes in. | A. draws a picture of the
drapes. |
| (d) Put the lights out when
you finish in the
living room. | A. hangs light bulbs on
clothes line. |
| (e) Measure two cups of rice. | A. Fills two cups with rice,
places one cup on top of
another and measures
their height with tape
measure. |
| (f) The meat market will deliver
a steak and a chicken. Please
trim the fat before you put
the steak in the icebox. | A. decorates fat with lace
and ribbons. |

By and large the strategy of play is to juxtapose alternate meanings for idiomatic verb phrases. Context is cheerfully disregarded by Amelia who supplies inappropriate interpretations for her jobs. As noted, the method of presentation is to juxtapose the verbal captions -- Amelia's tasks -- with her incongruous interpretations in pictures. This was the format I intended the children to use for their productions. Generally, it is a method familiar to and enjoyed by these ages.

The sixty-one youngsters who participated in the study were about equally divided into the four age/grade groups outlined above (6-7's; 8's; 9's; 10-11's). As a sample population, the group can be characterized as middle class, bright, active, articulate youngsters who found verbal play a welcome activity. Further, the school was located on the fringes of the Greenwich Village area of New York City and, as a result, had an unusual number of youngsters whose parents were in the creative or performing arts -- who were, if you will, "players" by vocation.

In my role as coordinator, I advised the teachers of the four class groups and worked with the children on special projects throughout the year. During the play sessions, I functioned as the teacher-in-charge. There were a total of six sessions -- held at weekly intervals -- with each class. In the first session, I met with the entire group and read Amelia Bedelia -- picture book style. Following this, the children were invited to verbally produce examples on the spot. After some examples were shared, I would gather with half the group (the rest worked on other projects with the teacher or on their own) at a table in the room, pass out paper and magic markers and invite them to record in words and pictures their own versions of play. The only class, predictably, for which this opening sequence didn't quite work was the 6-7's. After reading the book -- during which there was much laughter -- I got no response to

my request for examples. We moved to the drawing table with my comment that perhaps they needed more time to think of something. (They did come up with "something" which is discussed at length below.)

All the classes understood that they were in the process of creating a class "anthology," a common way of sharing individual creations in these classrooms. The expectation conveyed to them as we moved along was that every child must participate in at least three sessions and produce a minimum of two creations. Though this rule was necessary to preclude the result that those youngsters who don't play are in fact those who are unequal to the task, it had other beneficial effects. Once those few students who, for whatever reasons, were reluctant to play, joined the group, they were generally caught up in the enthusiasm of their playful peers. They observed the genesis and growth of their friends' creations and could, as a result, generally move ahead with their own productions. I kept the anthologies after they had been a part of the class libraries and subsequently analyzed the combined total of 286 creations in terms of adequacy of grasp of ambiguity.

Categorizing the Children's Creations

Criteria necessary to the construction of an adequate response are as follows: (a) the definition of two incongruously related meanings for a single phonetic sequence and (b) the

juxtaposition of these meanings in words and pictures to suggest that each is a legitimate interpretation of the other. Examples are: 1) Knight on a horse -- caption to a picture of stars and moon on the back of a horse (see Figure 1); and 2) Shop Lifting -- caption to a picture of a man balancing a supermarket overhead, and I'm up to my ears in papers -- caption to a picture of a man submerged in paper (see Figure 2).

At this level of analysis, the results are consonant with the findings of Shultz et al. Table 1 provides a count of adequate and inadequate responses (with corresponding percentages) for each group. Only eight of the 6-7's sixty-seven examples met criteria for adequacy while over two-thirds of the creations of each of the oldest groups can be classified as adequate.¹

These categories of adequate and inadequate have distinct subdivisions. As the examples of adequate creations indicate, the play responses can be divided into those derivative of phonological ambiguities (Knight on a horse) and lexical ambiguities (Shop Lifting/I'm up to my ears in paper). When the adequate responses of the three oldest groups are classified accordingly (see Table 2), the predominance of play with words/phrases representative of lexical ambiguities is evident -- not surprising in view of the fact that this was the model for play. As discussed below, however, the implications of these results reach beyond

the successful replication of the play model.

Inadequate examples for all groups can be divided into three subgroups. First, there are "reproductions" or those creations which reproduced one of the examples of play found in either the Parish or Gwynne books. A favorite (with the 6-7's) from the Gwynne book was "Fairy Tails" as a caption to pictures of fairies with tails. Second, there are those creations which can best be labeled "picture lexicons" (see Figure 3). In these examples, the creators have employed picture images to represent the different meanings of words/letters which are identical in sound.

It is primarily into these two inadequate categories that the "something" which the 6-7's produced falls (see Table 2). When we arrived at the drawing table at the first session, one boy asked whether he could do a picture of Amelia dressing a chicken -- apparently one of his favorite examples. I consented and others in the group followed his lead and produced their favorite examples.

The picture lexicons evolved as a result of another boy, Mark, saying, "Hey, there's 'sea', 'see', and 'c'. . . you know . . ." and he proceeded to identify the referents for these words. My response was "How might you play with that?" Mark thought a minute and then quite deliberately drew lines which divided his paper-space into thirds. Then he began his drawings. Others soon began offering other

possibilities (son/sun and red/read were popular) and followed the same process of blocking out paper space, drawing the pictures and inserting the words/labels.

Finally, there is the category "no double-meaning." In these cases, the creators chose a caption ("I could eat up a storm") for which they provided a legitimate rather than incongruous interpretation, i.e. a child sitting and eating -- a lot presumably -- at a table laden with food while a storm rages overhead. An adequate example of play with this caption from the oldest group depicts a person taking a bite out of a bolt of lightning.

Discussion: The 6-7's

On the face of it, the children's eagerness to reproduce favorite examples of ambiguity play from the Gwynne and Parish books appears to be another expression of delight in nonsensical, perceptually represented, incongruities. Just as they enjoyed looking at and listening to the books, so we might expect them to reproduce, or imitate, as it were, particular examples of play.

As is the case with so much of children's language learning, however, the reproductions reveal that the children didn't really imitate per se, rather they reconstructed what they, for the moment, understood to be the nature of ambiguity play. First of all, the fact that the reproductions had both pictures and words is significant.

Previously, in assessing reasons for the children's obvious enjoyment of the book, it was assumed, or, at least, was not clear, whether the incongruous pictures alone might be responsible for their laughter and represent the extent of their understanding of the source of humor. If this were the case, then a drawing would suffice as a response. However, all of the creations included words and pictures indicating the youngsters appreciation of the fact that the humor derives from both.

Moreover, the captions the children reproduced might be described as telegraphic in form. The children's rendition of "Fairy Tales" as a caption for a picture of fairies with tails is represented somewhat differently in Gwynne's book. It is the final item in the book and the question reads "Did you ever hear such a bunch of fairy tails?" The question captions a picture of a little girl, around whom fairies with tails are flying. In making the choice about what to include in their recreation, the 6-7's have repeated only those pieces of the scenario in which the ambiguity is represented.

Like the "reproductions" the "picture lexicons" appear to represent a step on the way to understanding ambiguities. Here the youngsters have changed the activity from one of play to the detection and enumeration of words with identical sounds but different meanings and/or spellings. Seventeen of these creations represented homophonic word-pairs

(see Figure 3); four explored word boundaries (soccer/sock-her); while another four explored lexical ambiguities ('space' as an interval between letters in a name and 'space' as outer space). What seems clear in these efforts is that while the youngest group of creators can detect words representative of ambiguous sound/meaning relationships, they were unable to play with them. Rather they seemed intent upon clarifying the ambiguities. The opportunity became an exercise in documenting what remains constant -- sounds -- and what varies -- meanings and/or spellings -- for certain words in the language.

In these efforts, the youngsters are performing a two-to-one mapping of meanings to sounds. Indeed, in coming to terms with our language, youngsters confront numerous examples of a single sound sequence representing different semantic domains. These discoveries provide conflicting evidence to children's initial perception that word-names and their referents might be intrinsically related. Such encounters with the same-sound/different-meaning pattern would appear to aid the child's separation of word and thing and thus contribute to an understanding of the arbitrary nature of word symbols. A similar two-to-one mapping strategy has been identified by Charles Read (1975) as characteristic of children's spontaneous attempts to connect sounds and letters. In this case, children find a way to resolve the fact that the English alphabet does not provide enough symbols

(26) to represent its nearly forty sound units. They readily double up in their use of letters, indicating an ability to deal with organizing principles which are more abstract than that exemplified by a one-to-one spelling match, the exclusive approach of most beginning phonic instruction. Such findings suggest a need for research which focuses on the identification of preschool and primary children's developing abilities to explore complex relations among language systems.

Finally, though unable to produce adequate exemplars of ambiguity play, the 6-7's creations do provide evidence of a growing capacity to stand back and scrutinize, in this case, sound/meaning categories of words outside of normal communicative contexts. Such a perspective, it was noted, is characteristic of all metalinguistic activity and is necessary in some degree for learning to read.

Discussion: 8-11's

Play with lexical ambiguities as interpreted by these three class groups can be almost entirely described as the producing of a literal interpretation (picture) of a figurative expression (caption). The captions tend to be either one or two words -- Shop Lifting/Nuthead/Footnote -- or complete phrases/sentences -- You took the words right out of my mouth/I'm blue/My feet are killing me/I'm up to my ears in paper. The pictures, as exemplified in Figure 2, exploit one or more of the concrete references embedded in

these idioms. Though the strategy of play is the same as that used in the Amelia examples (the juxtaposition of lexically possible with contextually inappropriate meanings for a single word/phrase) the children's creations differ in content. In their corpus, the exploitation of the literal references embedded in figurative descriptions of human experiences is nearly always present.

In the literature dealing with children's language learning, the regularity with which these ages supply literal interpretations of words/phrases has often been noted. Recent researchers of this phenomenon are Howard Gardner and Ellen Winner and colleagues (Gardner, Kircher, Winner & Perkins, 1975; Gardner & Winner, 1979; Winner, McCarthy & Gardner, 1980). These studies of the developmental sequence of metaphoric competencies highlight once again the avoidance in the middle elementary years of explorations of metaphoric language use. This "penchant for literalness" as Gardner and Winner (1979) describe it, "...realizes itself in a reluctance on the part of such youngsters to produce metaphors on request as well as a tendency to provide literal or narrational paraphrases for these figures of speech" (p. 134).

A different interpretation of this regularly noted behavior emerges when these children's creations are examined in relation to what is implied in terms of an understanding of the semantic system. First, let's look at the source of the potential ambiguities projected by these conventional figures of speech. Word meanings, as described by many

philosophers, linguists, and literary critics, do not represent static conceptual entities, rather they develop over time, shifting and changing to meet new needs and define new, or newly perceived, experiences (Burke, 1945; Cassirer, 1946; Huizinga, 1950; Langer, 1951; Read, 1955). Moreover, these same thinkers point out, the nature of this development is often metaphorical. Similarities between different domains of experience are noted and codified through the extension of a word/name ('nut'/'blue') to stand for an additional class of objects or experiences ('nuthead'/'I'm blue'). The examples indicate that the perceived similarities often draw parallels between the material world and those experiences which belong to the intangible or psychological sphere. The metaphoric extension of meaning, however, once accepted and integrated into daily exchange, is no longer noted. The initial recognition of relations between different domains fades, becomes "frozen" as it were, and the use of these words/phrases evokes only their figurative meaning. This is true for all except our literal minded elementary youngsters who, as this study again demonstrates, gleefully "unfreeze" literal references to figurative phrases.

The question in regard to word play is whether the deliberate resurrection of literal references for conventional figurative expressions represents a loss of metaphoric capacities, _____ or, in fact, is a necessary step in the child's acquisition and mastery of this

aspect of the semantic system? In view of the pervasiveness of metaphoric extension of meaning as a principle of linguistic evolution, it is possible that at this point in their language learning, youngsters are in the process of coming to grips with some of the manifestations of this principle through their play with lexical ambiguities.² The suggestion is that investigators of the nature and sequence of the child's acquisition of meaning evaluate the data in light of the system youngsters are encountering -- in this case, the nature of the evolution of metaphorical meanings in language. Such a perspective has been taken by L.S. Vygotsky (1962) in his descriptions of the nature and sequence of the child's early acquisition of word concepts.

Moving from a consideration of play as it figures in language acquisition to the arena of relations between ambiguity play and the development of mature metaphoric capacities, Gardner and Winner⁽¹⁹⁷⁹⁾ raise other disturbing possibilities regarding the middle elementary youngster's penchant for literalness, i.e., that it might be negatively related to the child's future appreciation and production of "new" or "live" metaphors. In their studies these researchers find that up until school age, youngsters reveal a readiness to produce metaphoric paraphrasings and "renamings" (a hair brush -- a park with grass) at a rate and of a quality unavailable to the seven to eleven-year-olds. "Only in the years preceding adolescence," these researchers

write, "when categorical practices of the culture have been well consolidated, is the child once again willing to undertake metaphoric language use" (p. 134). What takes over in between is a retreat to the concrete and an apparent loss of the previous burgeoning of metaphoric capacities.

These possibilities force a consideration of the children's creations from another point of view: what might be the connections -- if any -- between the successful juxtaposition of literal and figurative meanings of conventional idioms to the development of mature metaphoric productions? As a way of exploring this possibility let's examine what is involved in terms of the manipulation of word meanings in these creations. Generally, the productions highlight the fact that certain words/phrases name more than one class of objects/actions (their extensions) and, as a result, represent more than one set of attributes (their intensions). The play strategy revolves around the misalliance of extension and intension. Witness this misalliance in the "Shop Lifting" example:

to lift
(verb transitive)

extension

--to raise

--to steal

intension--bringing to a higher
position--taking property from
a store

In playing with the phrase 'shop lifting' the extension 'to raise' is inappropriately paired with the intension 'taking property from a store'. To produce these kinds of juxtapositions, the creator is called upon to perform an analysis of some part of the range of extensions and intensions represented by the idiom under scrutiny. The exercise is one of recovering -- speculating about, in a sense -- the property or attribute which prompted the metaphoric extension of the name in the first place. From this point of view, it would appear that in their play, youngsters are examining one of the bases of metaphoric creation: that an attribute representative of one class of ideas or experiences can be analogously represented in other domains. Indeed, such perceptions are a part of all metaphoric production, a fact well represented in the language through the sheer numbers of conventional figures of speech it contains. Moreover, the uncovering and highlighting of such relations is one of the abilities which characterizes mature metaphors. These ages, then, appear to be examining -- practicing, actually -- aspects of metaphoric creation which, at a later time, will assume characteristics fully recognizable as mature metaphoric competence.

It is useful to relate these patterns of play to strategies for constructing riddles. Not only, as noted, does the riddle provide a frame for juxtaposing literal/figurative interpretations, it is also a vehicle for encoding expression more nearly representative of "live" metaphors. Witness these riddles taken from three separate collections of children's riddle inventions:

--What are polka dots on your face?

Pimples. (McDowell, p. 101)

--What do you call a naughty kid when he grows up? A bad dad.³ (Geller 198/b, p. 672)

--White and thin, red within, with a nail at the end. A finger. (Opie and Opie, p. 77)

Here youngsters are engaged in a type of classification exercise similar to that described by Gardner and Winner⁽¹⁹⁷⁹⁾ as "metaphorical renaming" (p. 132).⁴ The surprise nature of riddle rhetoric appears to motivate youngsters to formulate alliances among objects/experiences outside routinely noted associations. Riddle chicanery is preserved through the revealing of similarities where only differences were thought to exist.

Metaphor, we know, is often considered a useful structure for expressing new and unusual perceptions of life experiences. Word play may serve as a stimulus to the young language learner to explore words/concepts outside usual semantic boundaries, an exploration which, it appears, prefigures mature metaphoric production. Finally, it is

well-known that the appreciation of metaphor is prerequisite to mastery of comprehension skills. Most mature narrative styles are liberally sprinkled with such constructions. The fact that youngsters can be found spontaneously exploring aspects of metaphor in their word play suggests that further investigation of these activities is needed to identify stages in the development of mature metaphoric competence.⁵

Summary and Educational Implications

In describing the elementary youngster's developing grasp of ambiguities, opportunities to create their own versions of ambiguity play appear useful to uncovering and describing qualitative aspects of the acquisition sequence. In this study, the 6-7's revealed their growing awareness of the linguistic elements represented in this type of play, while the three older classes transposed the opportunity into an examination of the metaphoric origins of figurative expression. Their penchant for literalness, it was seen, might represent a phase of acquisition in the grasp of semantic systems of language and a step on the way to developing mature metaphoric capacities.

Word play, long considered a maverick among children's language activities, has begun to assume a different place in our understanding of language learning. Recent research has put to rest notions that such activity is superficial in its examination of the nature of language and incidental

to processes of language learning. As a result, the way has been paved for a serious consideration of integrating word play and elementary language programs. In working towards this goal, at least two key areas need further investigation. First, since word play forms tend to be built upon exploitation of common sound/meaning patterns of words/phrases, they appear to provide a useful source around which to build programs for exploring systems of language (Geller, 1982a; 1982b). Specific relations need to be identified here. Second, can teachers who are knowledgeable about stages and strategies of play use children's productions as part of their formative assessments of individuals' developing metalinguistic skills? The potential usefulness of this last possibility would be contingent upon results of further investigations of relations among word play, linguistic awareness and reading processes.

References

- Asch, S. E. & Nerlove, H. The development of double function terms in children. In B. Kaplan & S. Wapner (Eds.), Perspectives in psychological theory. New York: International Universities Press, 1960.
- Burke, K. A grammar of motives. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945.
- Cassirer, E. Language and myth. Translated by S. K. Langer. New York: Dover, 1946.
- Cazden, C. B. Play and metalinguistic awareness: one dimension of language experience. Urban Review, 1974, 7, 28-39.
- Chomsky, C. Linguistic consciousness-raising in children. Language Arts, 1981, 58, 607-12.
- Chukovsky, K. From two to five. Translated and edited by M. Morton. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1925/1971.
- Clark, E.V. Awareness of language: some evidence from what children say and do. In A. Sinclair, R. J. Jarvella & W.J.M. Levelt (Eds.), The child's conception of language. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1978.
- Fischer, K. M. Metalinguistic skills and the competence-performance distinction. In L.H. Waterhouse, K. M. Fischer & E. B. Ryan (Eds.) Language awareness and reading. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1980.
- Gardner, H., Kircher, M., Winner, E. & Perkins, D. Children's metaphoric productions and preferences. Journal of Child Language, 1975, 2, 125-41.
- _____, & Winner, E. The development of metaphoric competence: implications for humanistic disciplines. In S. Sacks (Ed.),

- On Metaphor. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Geller, L. Children's humorous language: a curriculum for developing mastery of verbal skills. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University, 1981a.
- _____. Riddling: a playful way to explore language. Language Arts, 1981b, 58, 669-74.
- _____. Linguistic consciousness-raising: child's play. Language Arts, 1982a, 59, 120-25.
- _____. Grasp of meaning in children: theory into practice. Language Arts, 1982b, 59, 571-79.
- Gwynne, F. The king who rained. New York: Windmill paperbacks, 1970.
- Huizinga, J. Homo ludens: a study of the play element in culture. Boston: Beacon Press, 1950.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. & Sanches, M. Children's traditional speech play and child language. In B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (Ed.), Speech Play. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976.
- Langer, S.K. Philosophy in a new key. New York: New American Library, 1951.
- Lunderburg, I. Aspects of linguistic awareness related to reading. In A. Sinclair, R. J. Jarvella & W.J.M. Levelt (Eds.), The child's conception of language. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1978.
- Mattingly, I.G. Reading, the linguistic process and linguistic awareness. In J. F. Kavanaugh & I.G. Mattingly (Eds.), Language by ear and by eye: the relationship between

- speech and reading. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1972.
- McDowell, J. H. Children's riddling. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979.
- McGhee, P. On the cognitive origins of incongruity humor: fantasy assimilation versus reality assimilation. In P. McGhee & J. Goldstein (Eds.), The psychology of humor. New York: Academic Press, 1972.
- Opie, I. & Opie, P. The lore and language of schoolchildren. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959.
- Parish, P. Amelia bedelia. New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1973.
- Pearson, P. D. & Johnson, D. D. Teaching reading comprehension. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1978.
- Pollio, M. R. & Pickens, J. D. The developmental structure of figurative competence. In R. P. Honeck & R. Hoffman (Eds.), Cognition and figurative language. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum and Associates, 1980.
- Read, C. Children's categorizations of speech sounds in english. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975.
- Read, H. English prose style. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.
- Shultz, T. R. & Pilon, R. Development of the ability to detect linguistic ambiguity. Child Development, 1973, 44, 728-33.
- _____. Development of the appreciation of riddles. Child Development, 1974, 45, 100-6.
- _____, & Horibe, F. Development of the appreciation of verbal jokes. Developmental Psychology, 1974, 10, 13-20.
- Smith, F. Understanding reading: a psycholinguistic analysis

of reading and learning to read. New York: Holt, Rinehart
& Winston, 1978.

Vygotsky, L. S. Thought and language. Cambridge: M.I.T.
Press, 1962.

Winner, E., McCarthy, M. & Gardner, H. The ontogenesis of
metaphor. In R. P. Honeck & R. R. Hoffman (Eds.),
Cognition and figurative language. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence
Erlbaum Associates, 1980.

FOOTNOTES

¹An ethnographic study of four to eight year old's developing competence with riddle play by John Holmes McDowell (1979) supports these results. To date, McDowell's study provides the most comprehensive analysis of the significance of children's play creations to language learning.

²The notion that the course of children's word play and stages of language acquisition intersect is described by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Mary Sanches in their article "Children's Traditional Speech Play and Child Language" (1976). This theoretical examination clearly juxtaposes the child's developing language model with examples of related age/stage forms of play. The evidence suggests that in the early childhood years, play forms are dominated by explorations of the sounds of the system -- the aspect that these ages are bent on mastering -- while the play of the middle elementary ages moves to an examination of word meanings -- especially those ambiguous words/phrases identical in sound but with multiple related meanings. Youngsters delight in exploring what they perceive, for the moment, to be the linguistic "anomaly" that one word/phrase can have multiple referents.

³Interestingly this example was taken from a corpus of nearly two hundred (hink-pink) riddles produced by the 10-11

year old class group which participated in my word play study. The analysis of patterns of riddling expertise found in this corpus is described in "Riddling: A Playful Way to Explore Language" (Geller 1981b).

⁴Gardner and Winner (1979) note that children appear to "decode metaphors successfully" when they are embedded in a "situational context," e.g., riddles and/or analogy forms (p. 130).

⁵Research related to these issues has been done by Pollio and Pickens (1980) who examined interrelations between the development of competence with "frozen" (dead) and "novel" (live) metaphoric productions.

TABLE I

ADEQUATE/INADEQUATE CREATIONS FOR EACH GROUP

Age Group	Total # Creations	Adequate Creations	Inadequate Creations
6- 7	67	8 (12%)	59 (88%)
8	66	47 (71%)	19 (29%)
9	65	55 (85%)	10 (15%)
10-11	88	80 (91%)	8 (9%)

TABLE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF CREATIONS IN
SUBGROUPS OF ADEQUACY/INADEQUACY

Ages (Total Responses)	Adequate Types		Inadequate Types		
	lexi- cal	phono- logical	repro- ductions	picture lexicons	no double meanings
6- 7 (67)	4	4	28	25	6
8 (66)	44	3	2	9	8
9 (65)	50	6	2	0	7
10-11 (88)	74	6	2	1	5

Figure 1

Play with phonological ambiguities

Knight
on
a horse



Figure 2

Play with lexical ambiguities



Figure 3

Picture lexicons

